

Rebecca Lennon Viva La Revolution

“What if the snake does die?”

by Petra Reichensperger

“Cut off the head of the snake and the body will die. Ideas are harder to kill than snakes.” In her three-part work *Viva La Revolution*, Rebecca Lennon appropriates these words from the legendary film *Viva Zapata!*. The film depicts the tragedy of the Mexican popular hero from his beginnings as a revolutionary peasant to becoming president of the republic and finally getting assassinated. Lennon cites the words from various standpoints. Her piece leaves us in no doubt that the legend and the ideas live on, persisting in peoples’ minds despite shifting contexts. Lennon makes visible the differences that emerge from these shifts by deploying diverse performative modes: the possibilities of fiction and the film set, the exploration of various roles and formats, coherence amongst fragmented narratives and multiple audience situations.

How does *Viva La Revolution* operate?

Interview with Rebecca Lennon by Petra Reichensperger

PR The words “Don’t let it end this way, tell them I said something” are not only the title of one of your videos, but are also important for the conception of the whole piece.

RL Yeah, I became interested in these words for a few reasons. They are the ‘last words’ of Mexican revolutionary hero Pancho Villa. I became fascinated with their legacy. They have a hollow weight and multiple implications. They are connotative of revolution and change and at the same time empty of any such proposals. Also the narrative and evidence behind Villa’s death suggests that he died instantly with a gun shot to the head, so no last words were actually possible. When he was shot, some locals were used as a decoy and shouted: “Viva Villa!” When he turned to face them he was killed.

PR “Viva” also appears in the title of the whole series...

RL I found these words everywhere in Mexico, on posters, key rings, t-shirts. Also, the Hollywood films about the revolution are all titled Viva something: *Viva Zapata!*, *Viva Villa!*

PR Keeping things alive, even if they are fictional is a strong gesture. There is a moment when you do something similar though to a different end.

RL I don’t think that I am keeping anything alive, as such. More that I am working with the debris of things that are already dead, but carry on somehow. ‘Undead’ fragments of subjectivity that continue to function without their body or origins. In the case of Villa’s ‘last words’, they are made to float over a situation, which contradicts itself at every turn. I put them on a large billboard for a really short duration, only four hours. I

used the billboard cover that was already there, took it down with help, painted it and applied the vinyl text. The font and design was based on a hotel sign in Matehuala. I was interested in inhabiting the space like a hotel, which defies the logic of an advertising billboard.

PR This also explains why you brought together two different fonts on the billboard.

RL Yes, I wanted to un-authentically mimic the hand-made typography that I saw on signs around Mexico.

PR It seems that Culture Jamming is one of your strategies in setting up actions. Is that true?

RL This kind of strategy is something I am definitely interested in. Although, I don't aim to subvert consumer culture with my work, I am more interested in creating a situation, which plays with opposing conditions and meanings so that it becomes schizophrenic.

PR So the situations you are interested in are mostly connected to local conditions. In *Helium Scream* for example, you respond to a particular context.

RL Yes. When I first arrived in San Luis, I saw balloon stalls everywhere, with different animated faces floating around on them. I had a giant helium balloon made and printed in Mexico City with Madero's face from the film *Viva Zapata!*. In the film, the Hollywood script took liberties with Madero's death and I was interested in how at the point that he is killed, he turns to the camera and screams. Isolating just this act, it becomes the scream of an endless fiction. In this video, the balloon is placed in the courtyard of the jail where he was detained and left to deflate, while the sound of his screams continues to play out on loop in the space. I wanted to convey this idea that I brought up earlier, of a voice that escapes its body and just continues ad infinitum.

PR Why did you choose a western film reference?

RL I am broadly interested in western depictions of the 'foreign' and cinematic depictions of the 'extreme' or 'radical' and how they are absorbed into a capitalist framework. I don't wish to say anything concrete or political about Mexico per se.

PR How has *Viva La Revolution* changed from your first intentions?

RL My original concept was very loose: to explore the legacy of Pancho Villa's fictional last words, as absorbed into the current Mexican landscape. I wanted to leave it open to incorporate whatever I found when I arrived. The video *Drive by Cinema* has quite an obscure connection to the words, and sets up the whole sequence. It is located in a Mexican desert by the side of a road. While travelling alone by bus through the remote deserts leading to the mountainous 'ghost town' Real de Catorce, I saw an empty billboard by the side of a road and imagined people sitting in front of it. I imagined it was a screen and was somehow choreographing the desert with an epic cinematic soundtrack such as the one in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. In my version there is no film just an empty screen, and the soundtrack. Riding on the bus, I imagined that I was also an audience to this spectacle and this idea grew into this video.

PR A film set, where situations and possibilities of audiences are acted out, which are decisive for the experience and reception of performative works, is very important to achieve the surreal mini-spectacle you create in your videos. Do you see a relationship between *Drive by Cinema* and a film set?

RL I'm not sure about the term 'film set'. Although I do like the filmic reference. Some of the acts/function like sets but mostly, they are directed situations involving props.

PR Props often play an important role in your acts. At one moment you filmed two audiences, who are interestingly enough at the same time participants, wearing special heads.

RL Yes, I tend to contrast the ordinariness of a certain setting with props that don't quite belong there. The heads that you refer to are hand-made in papiermâché, painted white and look quite shoddy against the backdrop of dramatic nature captured in HD with an epic cinematic soundtrack. I guess the music is a kind of prop too, or a choreography device. In this case, the screen becomes a mirror image of the camera frame, as does the frame of the projection when it is shown.

PR In his essay on early film, Walter Benjamin describes artistic works first being presented to a technical apparatus. On a film set the presentation and with it its suitability for the film-experience, are rehearsed and tested. The technical apparatus takes the position of the viewer. Do you think that in your finished three-screen installation *Viva La Revolution*, the apparatus remains an interface between viewer and setting?

RL Yeah, I like that idea of 'performance for camera' as it totally defies what performance is supposed to be. And in allowing parts of the shooting to be exposed, it means that it's not a film either. I'm also interested in the personification of the camera that you suggest and the idea of a rehearsal that just continues and is never resolved. In fact, I like the idea of my work as some kind of constant, unending rehearsal.

PR You told me, that you are not interested in a stage, where something is elevated. It seems that you are more interested in staging events for video. In *Drive by Cinema* people keep looking at each other through an empty screen, which a carpenter made for you. This is a very strong cinematic image. At the same time it functions mostly as a scenario for possibilities, which is fascinating.

RL Yeah, I like the contrast between a situation and the mythology that happens when it becomes a film. I am interested in the possibilities of fiction. And in many ways my work is *about* the fictional properties of the camera, but this fiction has to be anchored to its reality, so that the fiction is undermined and the actual situation is allowed to shape it.

FIN

Author: Petra Reichensperger (DE) is a curator and is directing the Kunsthaus Dresden – Städtische Galerie für Gegenwartskunst since 2011.